

EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND QUALITY IN EDUCATION

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Since Slovenia gained its independence 10 years ago, *the renewal of the education system* has been one of the major national projects in our country. The reform has been especially intensive in the past few years. Systemic changes were first introduced in higher education by a new law in 1993. In 1996, new legislation regulating pre-university education from pre-school through elementary and secondary school to adult education was adopted.

Systemic solutions are connected with many topics and sub-topics, therefore the implementation of the new legislation has been embedded in a long and well structured discussion that has brought together many education experts and professionals. The discussion has included educators who are well acquainted with the education system as a whole or its individual subsystems as well as experts in individual fields and prominent and successful teachers of individual school subjects. The comprehensive task has been carried out at several levels. Work began with the analysis and assessment of the existing situation, the identification of the critical points in individual subsystems and the whole system, and continued with the preparation of fundamental premises (*White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia, 1995*) that served as a starting point for the preparation and adoption of educational legislation and curriculum renewal. The latter took place between 1997 and 1999, after the adoption of the legislation. This whole process has actually involved the structuring of professional initiatives that have been launched and tested by schools and teachers through numerous projects since the end of the previous decade. However, there was no legislative framework for the solutions that were found at that time. Neither could some of the resulting vision be confirmed in the long run.

A substantial amount of work has been done in the past years. It is not over yet. The legislative and curriculum reform is switching to another level: *the implementation* of solutions and the *evaluation* process. Besides, special attention is being paid to the complex issue of *quality assessment and assurance*. This issue intertwines all the efforts of the past few years in a specific way. We are aware that it links us with contemporary international trends. At the same time, it marks the spot that could provide answers to numerous questions and dilemmas resulting from the present system and the development of education in Slovenia.

The process of thorough changes in social subsystems such as education should be based on the analysis of present challenges in parallel with respect for tradition. Our educational tradition is mainly the same as all the others typical for this part of Europe in general. The level of our education system has been defined as fairly developed. Contemporary challenges establish a relationship between the regulation of the education system, the establishment of an independent democratic state and the process of solving the problems resulting from national political and economic changes. Technological and cultural challenges, also called the challenges of the global era, run in parallel with these developments and are of equal importance for our country as they are for any other. The period of globalisation is turning education into one of the key regulators of social processes. In such circumstances, the process of transforming the education system is subordinated to the imperative of the *accessibility of education* and of *quality education for all*.

Modern education policies are therefore no longer defined primarily by traditional quantitative orientations (for example the illiteracy rate, the percentage of females in education, the percentage of population in further education, etc.) but by the complex issue of quality in education (achievement of standards, co-operation of schools with parents and the environment, provision of vocational and professional qualifications for all, life-long learning, learners with special needs, social exclusion, education as one of the human rights, etc.). In the continuation I wish to touch on some of these issues, especially in relation to basic and secondary education.

1. Demographic Movements, Elementary School and Quality in Education

In Slovenia, the most important event of this school year is undoubtedly the beginning of a gradual *implementation of the new nine-year elementary school programme*. In September last year it was launched at 42 of the total 480 schools all around the country. At the same time, approximately 60 other schools are

preparing to begin with the new programme this autumn. This step has been carefully planned and extensively discussed by experts. Its aim is to achieve a new quality in elementary schools. Its historic importance is well illustrated by the fact that it took 130 years after the introduction of the eight-year mandatory school attendance to extend compulsory education to nine years, not to mention the substance of this change (and of numerous previous curriculum reforms).

When discussing the contemporary elementary school, we cannot avoid figures. The reason for that will soon become clear. The network of our schools, the beginnings of which go back to the times of Maria Theresa, is quite extensive. In this school year, there are 446 single site and main campus schools and 368 branch campuses with the total of 189,478 pupils. There were 24,275 eighth graders last year; this year, their number is 23,716. On the other hand, 20,060 children aged 7 started first grade this year; they were joined by 1,480 children aged 6 that entered the first grade of the new nine-year elementary school. Thus there are *4,436 first graders less* this year than there were last year. It should be mentioned, however, that the number of *secondary school students has increased* and has become stable in Slovenia in the past years. Moreover, the number of students in tertiary education has been growing already for a decade. People in our country are asking for more and better education in spite of the declining birth rate. This ambition has important implications for the entire education system, for the educational policy and for the quality of education.

Negative demographic trends, which are not limited to Slovenia, began to be noted in our elementary schools. In main campus schools, there is an average of 21.3 pupils in a class; on branch campuses, the average is as low as 14.2 pupils. In Slovenia, 8,000 less children were born in 1998 than in 1984 when there were 26,353 new-borns, who are now 15 years old. This means that the trend of decreasing numbers of elementary school pupils will continue in the coming years. What does this mean for elementary schools in Slovenia? What does it mean for their two most important aspects: the *access to education*, that is the geographical distribution of schools, and *educational quality*? What problems are we facing and how to solve them?

In Slovenia, we are well aware of the importance of schools for their communities on one hand, and for the educational background of every young person on the other. We try to incorporate this issue in all vital documents. By-laws that regulate the distribution of schools, their establishment and changes in their status provides a framework for founders (that is municipalities in the case of elementary schools) to carefully *plan the school network*, that is the regional distribution of schools and thus achieve the most rational use of premises and staff. At the same time, there are provisions protecting the existing school network: the smallest number of pupils that guarantees an on-going operation of branch-campus schools in remote areas is five. No massive close-down of schools is intended. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the number of pupils will continue to decrease and that substantial efforts to overcome this problem will be required on the part of the ministry, school management, municipalities and the state. In particular, we are trying to achieve that at least a part of the funding for elementary education would be earmarked and publicly recognised as *strategic budgetary funding for regional development* and the preservation of uniform population density. In other words, this funding should be allocated from budget items that are earmarked for wider purposes than education proper.

Even if such endeavours are successful, we will still have to face the ever-present question of how to achieve as good results as possible with the most rational organisation in the given situation. On one hand, the lower number of pupils has *positive effects* reflected in the reduction of teaching in two shifts (at present, 3% of all elementary school classes still receive instruction in shifts). This is an element of quality that should be further exploited. The lower number of pupils, however, has other consequences as well. In order to face them, organisational solutions taking into account various dimensions of educational quality should be prepared.

If we try to preserve the existing school network in spite of the given demographic movements, these endeavours will most certainly increase the number of so called *classes of combined instruction* (classes formed by different grades, pupils of different age). Last year, only somewhat over 2% of classes received combined instruction. In past, however, this was a routine at many Slovene schools and teachers were able to cope with it in a highly professional manner. Today, parents as well as teachers at schools that face a possibility of switching over to such organisation of teaching often oppose it. In last years, this dimension has also been neglected in teacher training. I nevertheless believe that I share the opinion of many educators that *classes of combined instruction do not necessarily mean a lower quality*. A high professional level and appropriate methods of teaching can turn it into an advantage in many respects, as it can be seen from the experience of other European countries with a similar population distribution.

A right response to this challenge is, first and foremost, proper teacher training, including training aimed at high quality teaching in combined classes. In the past few years, a comprehensive system of in-service teacher training has been developed and additional forms of training and teacher exchanges with countries that have achieved a high quality of teaching in combined classes are planned. Well trained teachers will be better able to overcome parents' fears connected with such organisation of instruction and indirectly prevent the drain of children from branch- to main-campus schools. This *drain of children* is an additional, though unnecessary, threat to branch campuses in Slovenia. We should bear in mind the fact that, although it does not lead to the closure of a certain school nor does it represent a direct threat to the existence of schools in rural areas, it certainly *jeopardises the quality of education* at those schools.

While branch-campus schools face the necessity of teaching in combined classes, main-campus schools often meet with a *smaller number of classes of the same grade*. Teachers that will be employed full time to teach only one subject will become rather an exception than a rule in elementary schools. Other countries with similar demographic trends are a good example of this. In the past ten, fifteen years, discussions on teacher training often focused on a challenging question whether it was right to favour well educated teachers *specialised in a single subject*. It seems that this dilemma has been overcome because such teacher training strategy almost inevitably leads to a situation in which some subjects are taught by teachers without adequate qualifications. Present strategies *favour double-major teacher training* and even leave open possibilities for subsequent quality teaching of a third and perhaps more subjects.

2. Social Transition, Secondary Schools and Quality in Education

In spite of the unpopular fact that there are fewer children in each cohort that finishes elementary school, we are pleased to state that *the number of young people* who continue their schooling *at secondary schools is increasing* every year. In the 1990/91 school year, 12% of pupils that finished the eighth grade did not go to secondary school; five years later, this percentage amounted to 8%, and this year it is down to only 2%. One of the most important national educational goals is thus gradually being achieved. It is also encouraging that the number of young people enrolled in longer (most often four-year) secondary programmes is on the increase as well as it is the number of those who continue their studies after secondary school. Both trends are a guarantee that it will be easier for secondary schools to overcome the effects of shrinking cohorts, while the opportunities for young people will be better.

A number of factors influence the development of secondary education. In addition to *demographic movements*, the impact of *structural changes in the economy* and changed *labour market* requirements are particularly important for a part of vocational and technical education. Labour force shifts from the industrial to the service sector are evident. This requires suitable interventions in the overall programme structure of vocational and technical education. Changed demographic movements on one hand and changes in the economy on the other influenced systemic and curriculum solutions implemented in the past years. Those movements also influenced the formation of goals for further development of secondary schools: *high quality education, the provision of vocational qualifications or education leading to further studies for all young people, and a systemic provision of life-long education opportunities* are at the forefront of our endeavours. Enrolment statistics for various forms of education, increasing enrolment in secondary education and the number of secondary school graduates and apprentices who successfully completed their training are a proof that the goals were set realistically.

We know that *success* in secondary education is strongly influenced by students' *motivation*, which, in turn, depends to a large degree on whether students were accepted by the school of their first choice and on the previously acquired skills and knowledge. In this decade, the transition from elementary to secondary school mirrors *massive changes in applicants' intentions*. They reflect the impacts of global social and economic changes. Substantial changes in young people's interests cause numerous problems. In certain cases it is difficult to adapt the distribution of programmes to these changes in time because a number of problems have to be solved, from teacher redundancy or shortage to excessive or insufficient space and equipment. These issues are related to possible enrolment limitations at certain schools as well as the termination of individual programmes and reorientation of some schools towards other programmes.

In addition to *gimnazija* programmes, programmes leading to employment in the service sector, for example in business and trade, in health professions, as hairdressers and sales persons, are especially popular. The number of applicants for such programmes often exceeds the available places, therefore some schools still have to limit their enrolment. We are happy to say that *the number of applicants who undergo the selection procedure because of limited enrolment is decreasing*. Five years ago, *almost half* of the applicants (49.7%) underwent this

procedure; in 1999/2000, the number dropped to *one fourth* (27.1%). This has been achieved thanks to the efforts of the ministry and schools to form additional classes if only the staff and space permit it. Last autumn, *97% of all applicants were admitted to the school of their choice*. In 1998, on the national level 364 applicants did not succeed in being admitted to any of the schools they had listed as their priority; in 1999, there were only 78 of them.

At the same time, interest in certain programmes is declining. If we analyse secondary school enrolment by groups of activities, we can notice *the greatest fall in interest in education programmes based on economic activities that were hardest hit by the economic transition*. For example, enrolment in textile schools used to be stable and amounted to about 5.5%; in the past five years, however, it fell considerably and now amounts to only 1.7%. The textile branch is followed by mechanical engineering, leather processing and paper making. Contrary to that, *enrolment in certain programmes is on the increase*. In business and trade programmes it grew from 14.1% at the beginning of the last decade to the present 18.4%. The increase is the greatest in *gimnazija*, which were reformed already a decade ago: from 23.4% of all secondary students in 1997/98 to 32.5% at present, which is to a large extent the consequence of the establishment of technical and art *gimnazija*.

On the bright and the dark side, schools face a similar phenomenon. Schools with *declining enrolment* (especially the ones that were very popular some years ago) also face *declining achievement rates*. On the other hand, certain *gimnazije* that are highly popular are noticing that the scholastic achievement is *below average also if the percentage of the young population in this type of school is above average*.

3. Scholastic Achievement and School Dropout

One of the important goals of the educational reform, tightly connected with quality in education, is *the reduction of dropout*. Dropout occurs already in elementary schools. It involves pupils that leave school when they fulfil their compulsory schooling requirement but before they finish the last grade. This group is very small and most of them continue their training at lower vocational schools. According to the law, young people can enrol in these schools if they fulfil their compulsory schooling requirement and successfully complete at least the sixth grade. Others decide to enrol in elementary schools for adult learners. In both cases, their education is fully funded by the state. Another form of dropout is noticed at the *transition from elementary to secondary school*. It is relatively low in Slovenia. The data for this year show that 98% of pupils enrol in secondary school after the completion of elementary school. This form of dropout was reduced by approximately 10% in the last years. This is also the result of intensive counselling in schools. However, the fact that almost all children continue their education after elementary school adds a new dimension to the problem of dropout in secondary schools.

Regardless of the fact that dropout is relatively high in secondary schools, *a decreasing trend* could be noticed in the past years as a result of various measures. If it is measured by the percentage of repeaters in individual school years, it dropped from 5.4% in 1994/95 to 3.96% in 1999/2000. If we follow the cohorts starting with that *enrolled* in 1989 and finishing with that *graduated* in 1998, the analyses of the Ministry of Education and Sport show that *it fell* from 11.3% to 6.7% in *gimnazija*, from 13.3% to 11.9% in technical schools, and from 20.3% to 16.6% in secondary vocational schools, while *it increased* from 22.1% to 31.9% in lower vocational schools (although we should bear in mind the fact that the percentage of young people enrolled in the latter type of schools is declining).¹ The data thus illustrate favourable trends in all secondary education forms, with the exception of programmes that, as a rule, are attended by most vulnerable young people. Therefore *measures against social exclusion in education* are one of the most important elements of education strategies for the future and, consequently, one of the most important elements of providing quality education for all.

Because this concerns an exceptionally complex problem, *measures for dropout reduction* should aim at various points of the education system. At the level of the system as a whole, they include the introduction of new forms of secondary education (apprenticeship training, vocational courses, certification of qualifications, alternative education forms for young dropouts). The reduction of dropout was one of the objectives highlighted by the curriculum renewal. A systematic extension of the school network and an increase in study places are an instrument that makes it possible for a growing number of students to enrol in programmes by which they are really motivated and which are not too far away from their homes. In this way, the social and regional

¹ In the case presented, the measurement methodology was based on the collection of data on dropout in various secondary school programmes and on the percentage of students that failed to complete the programme within five years after their enrolment regardless of the programme's duration (two, three, four or five years). In this way, the differences in the duration of programmes, repeaters and transferring students were taken into account.

dimensions are considered. The 1995 introduction of *matura* examinations, which are characterised by external assessment, had a highly positive impact on the quality of work in *gimnazija* and secondary technical schools. It was accompanied by a systematic and intensive additional in-service training of teachers, the reconstruction of old and the construction of new schools, and the provision of equipment. Schools pay considerable attention to vocational counselling for children that are in their final stage of elementary education.

New educational programmes have been gradually introduced in the field of secondary education as well. They contain new curriculum solutions. Their implementation has been paralleled by extensive in-service teacher training, which is a prerequisite for them to fulfil their mission in an autonomous and professionally responsible way.

4. From Curriculum Changes to Evaluation and Self-evaluation

At the end of the curriculum reform, the evaluation process for newly introduced programmes was launched at the state level last year. A special State Commission in charge of the introduction and monitoring of new programmes was appointed. So far it has focused on methodological issues of evaluation. There are also three field commissions (for general education, vocational education and training, and adult education). At this stage, a plan of assessment studies to assess the most important elements of implemented changes is prepared. In this case, we are talking about *evaluation at the national level*. This is an analytical reflection on performed tasks, including newly adopted and implemented programmes, syllabi and catalogues of required knowledge. Evaluation is performed in co-operation with schools, teachers and certain state institutions. It is based on the methodology adopted by the State Commission. The results and interpretations of evaluation studies will show if new curriculum solutions at the level of programmes, syllabi, catalogues of required knowledge or any other element need to be completed or changed. The State Commission will submit its findings to the National Council of Experts, which is competent for the adoption of education programmes according to our legislation.

In addition to the *evaluation* at the state level, *self-evaluation* is highlighted as the process that helps schools find out what they are like through their own activity. Schools discover their ranking when they compare their findings with the data collected at the state level. The purpose of this exercise is to *encourage schools' internal development*, to maintain the level of quality already achieved in individual fields, and to look for improvement mechanisms for recognised weak areas. We are convinced that the *issue of quality assessment and assurance* is turning into the *focal issue of further educational development*. As it was necessary to introduce systemic changes in preliminary steps, so is the adoption of new curriculum solutions at the state level most certainly only the first step in the process of assessing and improving the quality of schools' activities.

The issue of quality in education encompasses practically all aspects and dimensions encountered in schools. The notion of quality therefore includes not only the assessment of students' achievements but also the description, school atmosphere and all other education-related issues, including the hidden curriculum. In particular, I would like to underline a potential danger: the comprehensiveness of the goal -- to improve the quality of educational activities -- can obscure the actual conditions and realistic requirements at the operational level, that is concrete procedures that are indispensable for the achievement of this goal. Therefore I once again underscore *three key steps* that can substantially contribute to the reinforcement of the *quality assessment and assurance process*:

- (a) continuing in-service training of teachers,
- (b) evaluation of new programmes, syllabi and catalogues of required knowledge, and
- (c) self-evaluation by schools.

5. Self-evaluation by Schools

The question of how to design an instrument that would encompass the education system as a whole and would enable the comparison of the quality profile achieved by individual national education systems is undoubtedly a pressing issue. For the quality of activities at schools themselves, however, it is more important whether individual schools will be able and willing to assess and consequently improve the quality of their work on the basis of the collected information.

Self-evaluation by schools is becoming one of the key points considered to be a key factor in the assurance of quality in the educational process. This is the prevailing opinion at the national level as well as at schools that adopted self-evaluation as a work improvement method. This consensus is based on the understanding that individual school should act as a co-ordinated whole, that its internal dynamics largely determines the behaviour

of individuals within it, and that the potential of all stakeholders (students, teachers and others) should be used in a truly optimal way.

At the beginning of this decade, Slovenia wilfully decided for a different concept of *school inspection* than it had been instituted before. Nowadays the inspectorate is not an institution in charge of all issues, including the most difficult ones, concerning the education process in the classroom. Thus it does not deal with the important issues concerning the assurance of work quality in individual schools. Even the countries with well developed inspectorates have discovered that in contemporary societies schools can operate at a high quality level only if they develop their specific *culture of self-evaluation*. They are well aware of the fact that today's schools operate in a different, more democratic and rapidly changing society. They are also aware of the schools' need to reflect upon their own work and to continuously assure the quality of their activities. Schools do that in order to assert themselves as democratic institutions within such societies - in relation to students, parents and the society as a whole. As democratic institutions, they meet the requirements of the population they serve and maintain their scholastic autonomy at the same time. On the basis of self-evaluation and continuous endeavours to improve their weak points, schools can inform others about the quality of their work. In this way -- and not by closing from the world -- they can create their own identity and strengthen their professional autonomy.

In the past school year, two projects steered in this direction were carried out in Slovenia: the *Learning Schools Project* at the School for Principals and the *Mirror Project* at the National Education Institute. Since last autumn, a proposal for a new comprehensive model has been prepared. It should be a step towards providing Slovene schools and other educational institutions with a set of proven instruments for systematic quality assessment and assurance. Self-evaluation is the means, and quality assurance the goal in this process. This concerns the initiative for the preparation of a self-evaluation model, launched last autumn by the Ministry of Education and Sport. This initiative connects all important institutions and their human resources. The first proposal of the self-evaluation instrument was discussed at annual conferences with school management teams. Participating institutions and experts will take part in the project as external partners of schools that can participate on a voluntary basis. The project is based on the belief that *the fundamental objective* of the project aimed at improving the quality of school activities should not be the ranking of schools by quality, on the contrary, the aim should be *to prepare the set of instruments that will enable schools to continuously assess and improve their own work either themselves or with partial external assistance*. In this way, schools can first assure the quality in areas for which we can claim on the basis of comparisons that we have achieved high international standards (for example in natural sciences) and also actually improve the quality in weak spots (for example dropout in vocational education, differences among schools, etc.).

6. Conclusion

The issue of quality in education has become a trend issue in this decade. It is studied by individual researchers and national institutions, school management teams and teachers. It has also become one of educational policy priorities. It is first defined as an issue at the national level. National education strategies are based on national traditions and a specific mix of actual problems, which are defined by the cross sections of the achieved development levels and contemporary challenges. Contemporary challenges no longer make it possible for national education strategies to be autarkic, that is self-sufficient. The issue of quality is related to the issue of comparability and the necessity to co-operate. Therefore quality in education is gaining in importance as the topic of international co-operation in education. I am convinced that this conference will prove to be an important contribution in this direction.

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